

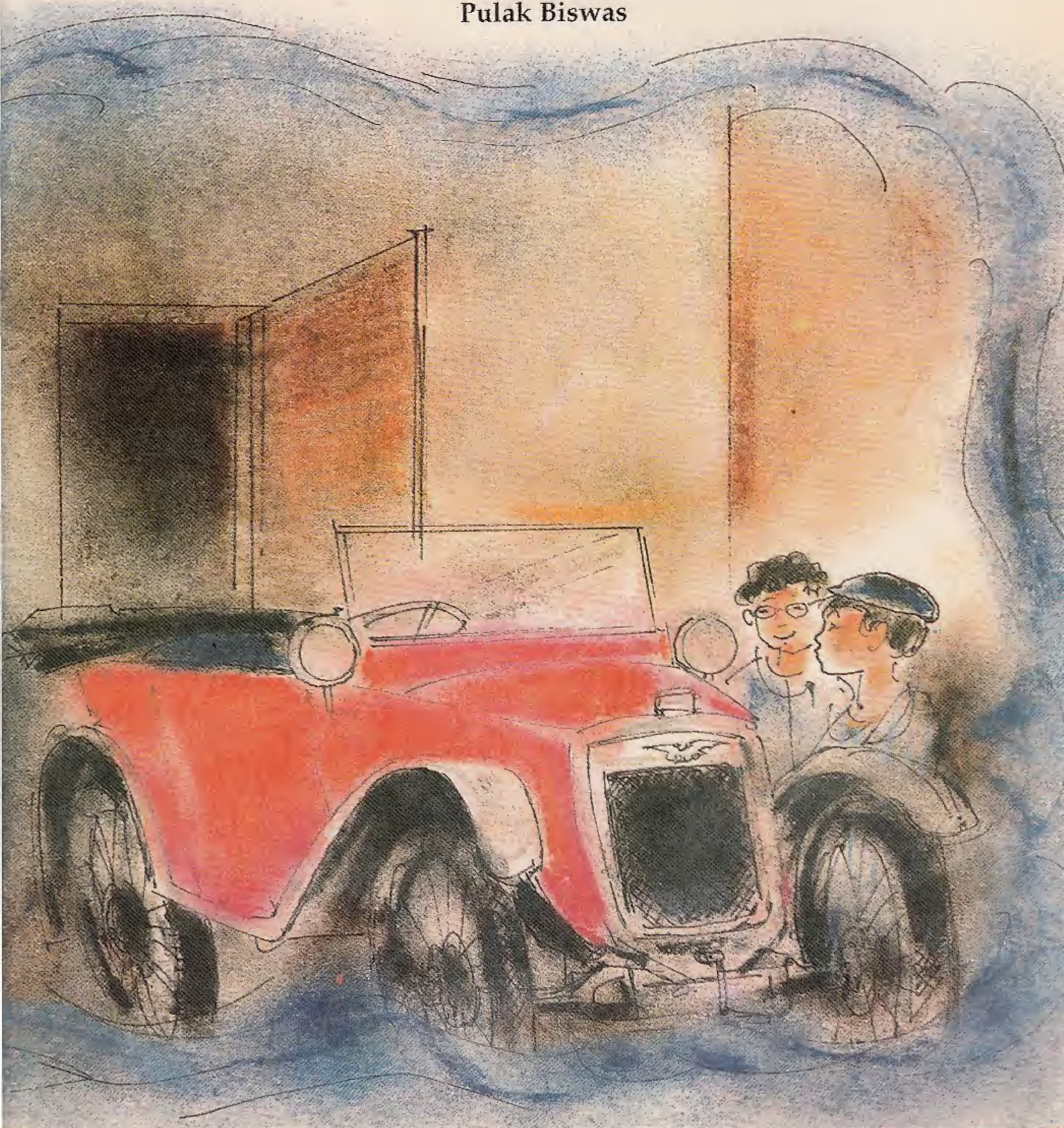


Cheerful Spirits

Gita Iyengar

Illustrations

Pulak Biswas



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A NEW FRIEND

When Priya looked out of the window one morning, she saw a boy standing at the backyard of the house next door. The sight cheered her up. Her family had moved into their new house only a week before so she had no time to make any friends. This was the third week of the summer vacation and she was feeling bored.

The boy was dressed comfortably in a tee-shirt and bermudas. He was poking about in a corner of the yard. You couldn't really say that house had a garden because tall grass covered most of the yard. The boy was looking down at something and burrowing. Sometimes he shifted out stones. In between he kept slapping himself on his arms and legs. It looked funny but it's likely he was only trying to keep the mosquitoes away.

Priya ran out of the house up to the wall that separated the two houses.

"Hi, there!" she called out.

He didn't notice. He was standing akimbo, shifting rocks from somewhere beneath.

"Hey, there!" Priya tried again. This time the boy heard her call and looked around.

"What are you doing?" said Priya.

"There's a tunnel here made by a big rat or something. I'm trying to see how far it goes. Come and see," he offered.

Priya had never gone looking for anything like a rat's hole in all her life. In fact, it had never ever struck her that she ought to do so. So, when he was inviting her, she felt she should take a look. She climbed over the wall and went over to where he stood.

There was a big hole amidst the grass. When she bent down, she could see a tunnel which widened out a bit further and divided into two. "What if the rat jumps out at us?" Priya asked.

"Of course it won't. It knows we are here," said her new friend.

She straightened up and looked about her at the house. It looked as though it had been lived in for a long time. Not like her house which was brand-new and looked and even smelled new.

"What's your name?" Priya asked.

"Harsh," said the boy.

"What's your name?" asked Priya again.

"Harsh", he said once more.

"I wish you'd stop sneezing and tell me your name," said Priya, sounding a bit annoyed.

"My name," he said, rather irritated, "is Harsh. H-A-R-S-H, Harsh. But you can call me Hari."

"My name is Priya," said Priya. "I live in the house next to yours. We came just last week."

"I know," said Hari. "I saw your things being taken out of the truck. Do you have a bicycle?"

"No, but I'm going to get one soon."

"I've got a bicycle" said Hari, "but I've removed the front wheel."

"Why?"

"When I fix it, it will run much better."

"Can I see it?" asked Priya.

So Hari led Priya into his house to show her his bicycle. It was propped up against one wall of what he called the 'store room'. The room had all kinds of odds and ends—tyres and bits of tubing, tools, half-used cans of paint, a rope, a can of grease, a box full of nails and nuts and bolts, a spade, a broken down table-fan and a transistor radio with its outer casing off.

"What's all this?" asked Priya.

"Just things we use," said Hari vaguely.

"Who uses them?"

"We all do, sometimes," said Hari airily. "But of course a lot of it needs fixing. Come on let's go to my room."

On the way they passed through a long corridor lined with shelves upon shelves of books.

"Wow!" exclaimed Priya, "What a lot of books!"

"My mother can't bear to throw out a single book," said Hari.

"In fact, some of these belonged to my grandfather."

"How do you reach the ones on top?" asked Priya craning her neck upward.

"Oh, I just climb the shelves," said Hari, hopping up like a monkey and perching on the edge of a shelf. "But my mother, if she ever needs a book from up here, she brings in the ladder."

Priya reached up and pulled out a book from one end of the shelf. A tiny cloud of dust puffed out with it.

"Harsh!" went Priya who was rather allergic to dust, "Harsh!"

"I told you to call me Hari," said Hari, as he clambered down and ran off towards his room.

But Priya hardly heard him, for after her first sneeze she discovered something quite startling. The book she'd pulled out was a picture album and it had sprung open. There was a photograph on that page—the photograph of a woman with eagle eyes and raven hair combed straight back, probably pulled back into a knot.

And as she looked down at it, the lady in the picture said quite clearly, "I don't like to be sneezed at!"

"I'm sorry," said Priya, "I didn't mean to sneeze at you. It was the dust."

"I can't hear you," said Hari, from his room. He thought Priya was talking to him. "Come here."

Priya bounded into Hari's room with the album in her hands. "Look at this!" she exclaimed, all excited.

Hari glanced at it and remarked casually, "Oh that! It's daddy's old family album. All old pictures like this one. See what a long face she has!"

"No manners," said the lady severely.

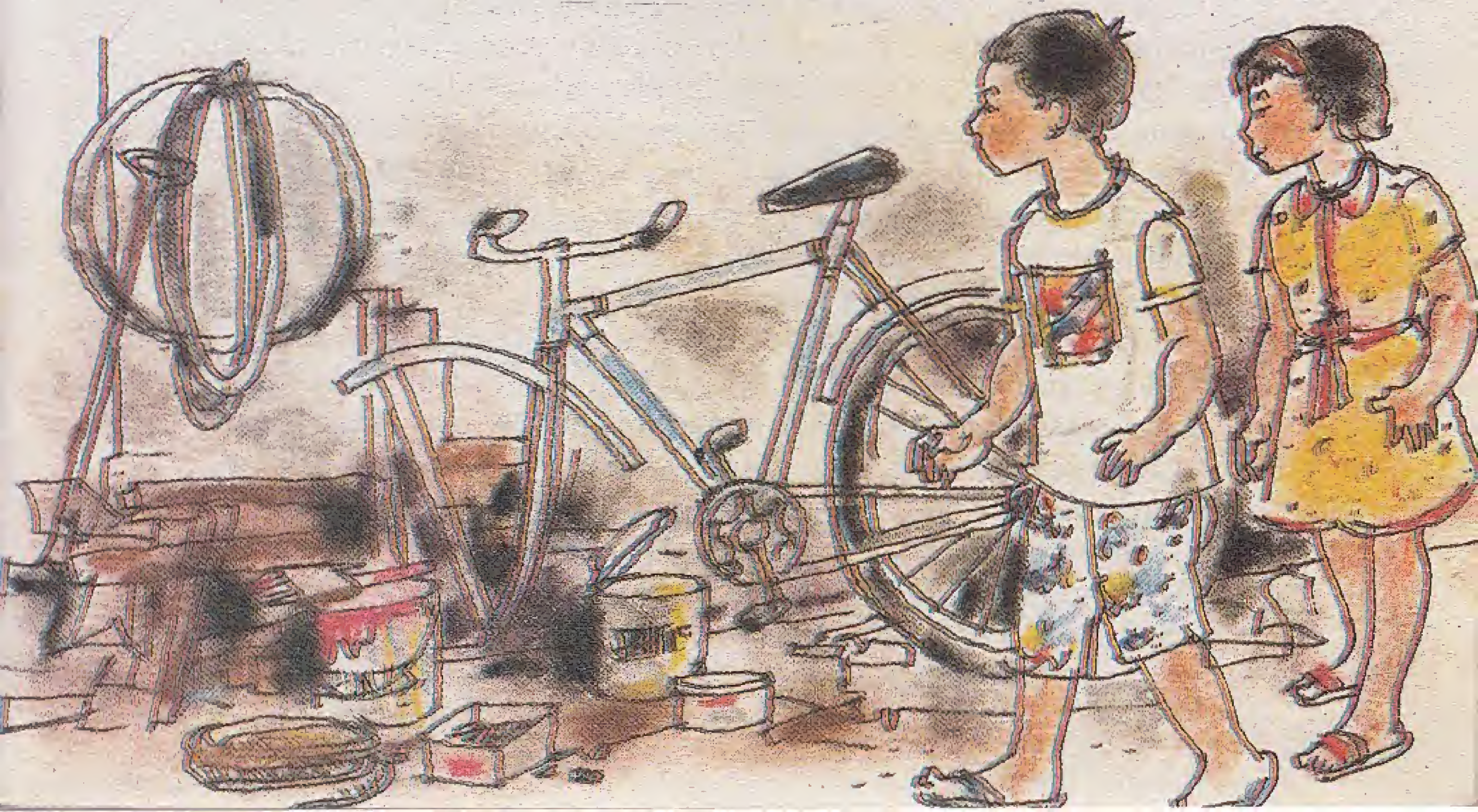
Hari's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "She spoke!", he gasped.

"Yes, she spoke to me too," said Priya.

The lady sniffed with annoyance and put her nose up in the air. It was weird seeing a face in a snapshot do that!

"Who's she?" whispered Priya.

"My great-grandma or something," whispered back Hari.



DISCOVERY OF THE ALBUM

"What do you mean something?" rapped out the old lady. "I am your great-grandmother."

Hari gulped and looked uneasy. "It's all your fault that this is happening," he told Priya. "Such queer things never happened before."

"It's your album," retorted Priya, just as certain that she was not to blame. "I don't know anything about it!"

"Silly children, remarked great-grandma, "squabbling over nothing! They don't know I made it happen."

"You did?" said Hari.

"How?" demanded Priya.

The old lady looked pleased with herself. "On my birthday," she said, "I can make this whole album come alive."

"Oh, is it your birthday?" said Priya, "How nice! And how old are you today?"

"Just a hundred and five years, or maybe a year more or less. I can't be sure," said great-grandmother chattily.

"That old! Then why don't you have white hair?" wondered Hari.

"Silly!" chided great-grandma, "this photograph was taken when I was just twenty-two."

"But why didn't you smile when they were taking your photograph?" asked Priya.

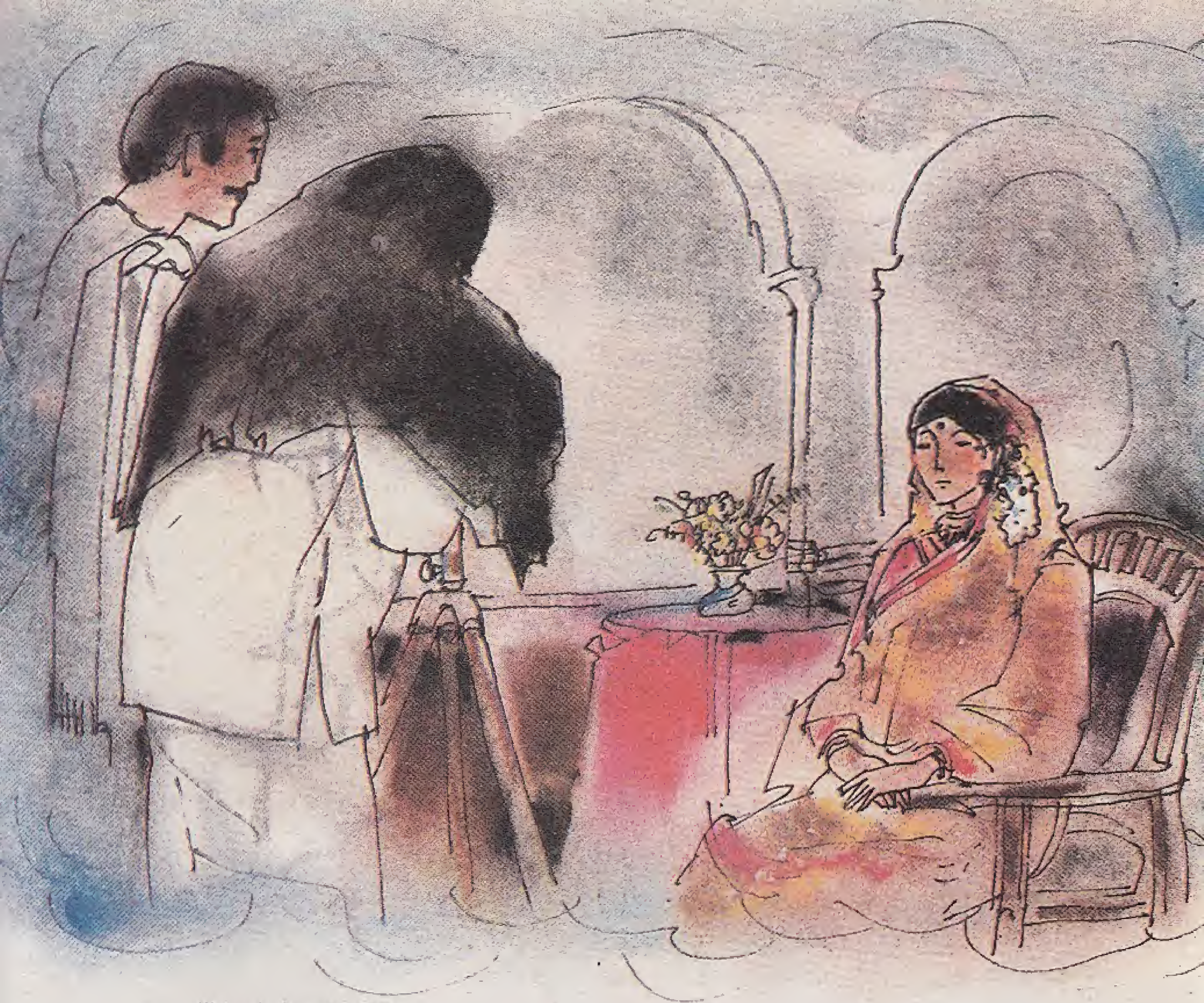
"As though I was a giddy little girl to be showing all my teeth! So even though I was excited I put on a very proper face in front of the camera." The old lady smiled faintly and continued, "I felt like giggling when the photographer kept popping behind his black sheet and coming out again. But you see, your great-grandpa was right there and he would have given me a terrible scolding if I'd done that. So I just kept on sitting there very prim and proper wishing it would soon be over."

"You mean you were already married then?" asked Priya.

"Why, child!" said the old lady impatiently, "I was a bride when I was just five years old. And when this picture was taken I was already the mother of three." Her eyes narrowed as she looked at Priya. "And how old are you?" she asked.

"Almost eleven," said Priya jauntily.

"Eleven! and still single!" said great-grandma pityingly. She turned to Hari and said, "It's time your sister was married."



"Yuck," said Priya.

"She's not my sister" said Hari. "And grandma, no one gets married that early nowadays."

"Ah, times have changed," sighed his great-grandmother.

"Tell us something about your life," said Hari eagerly.

"Oh, I lived a busy life," began the old lady, "since I had a big family to look after and..."

"How big?" interrupted Priya.

"How big a family? A full twenty—though sometimes there'd be..."

"You had eighteen children?" said Hari sounding quite shocked.

"Eighteen children? Whatever gave you the idea?" said his great-grandma, "I just had six."

"But you said there were twenty in your family," pointed out Priya.

"Of course there were twenty—at the very least! You see, there were the two of us and our six," said the old lady, counting on her fingers, "and my brother-in-law, his wife and their seven children, then the old folks, and a couple of cousins. And besides, we had other people coming to stay as well. So it was quite a crowd."

"It must have been such fun," exclaimed Priya.

"Fun!" huffed great-grandma, "it was a lot of work—that's what it was. And people always treading on one's toes."

"But I bet you never got bored," said Priya.

"Bored? What does that mean?" said the lady mystified.

"You know," explained Priya, "not having anything nice to do."

"Well, I always had plenty to do," said great-grandma, "but can't say it was always nice."

"But didn't you ever travel to far-off places?" asked Hari.

"Oh, yes, I did," said great-grandmother promptly, "that was because your great-grandpa was a revenue officer. Why, I travelled all over the state from Anantapur to Kanyakumari."

She seemed to think that a great distance, but to the children who had more modern ideas on the subject great-grandma's travel seemed sadly limited.

"What was the most exciting thing that happened to you, grandma?" asked Hari.

"It was the night the burglar broke in," replied the lady, eyes shining. "It was two in the morning, or maybe three. I remember it was December, or maybe January, for I was feeling cold. I got up to see if the children were well covered. Then I heard this faint noise. I felt it was coming from the back of the house so I went to look. I wasn't sure whether it was just the palm tree knocking against the tiles of the roof ..."

"Oh grandma," groaned Hari, "tell us the story quickly."

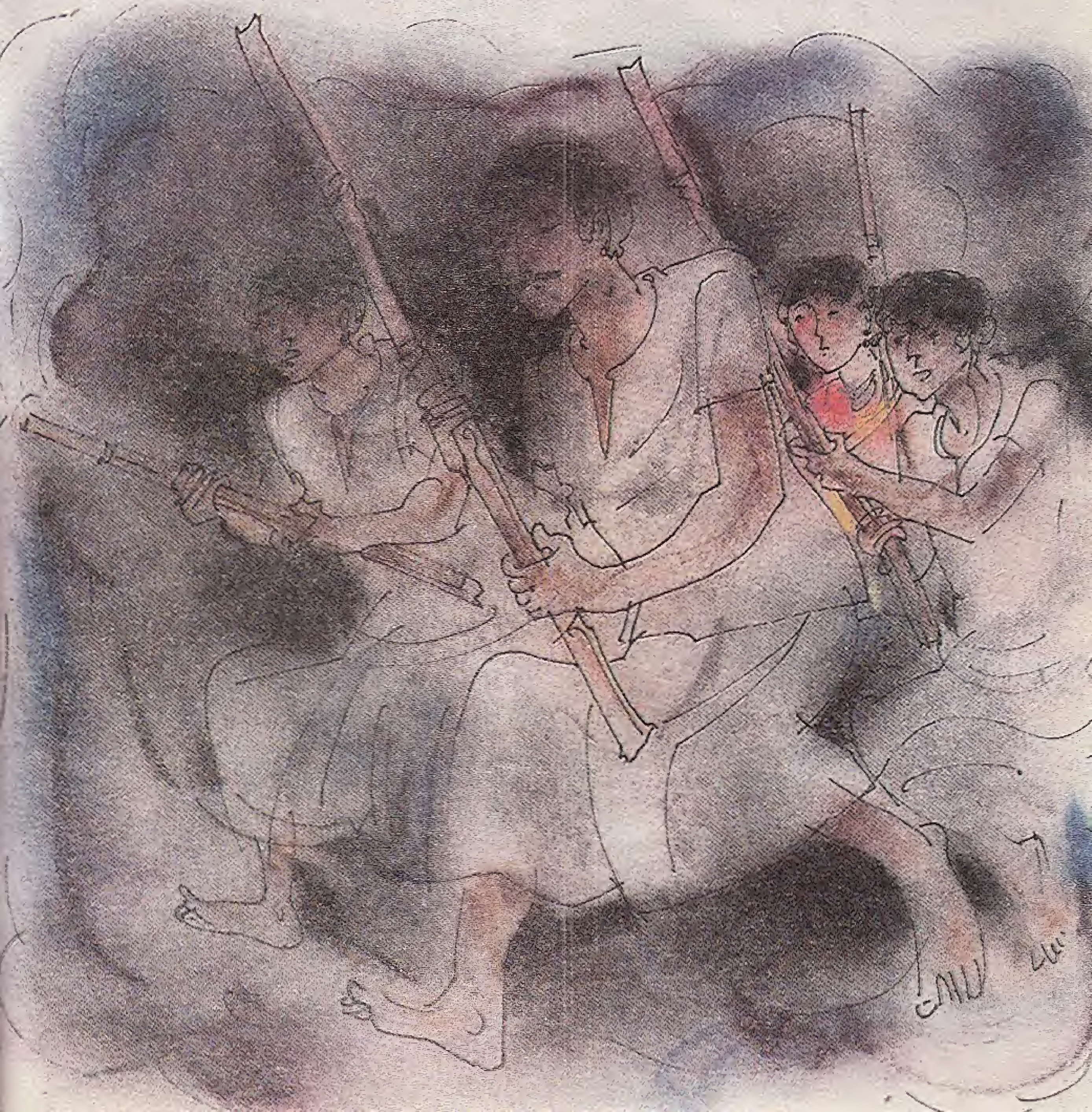
"So impatient!" sniffed great-grandma, "well then, we had our kitchen at the back of the house, and next to it a long passage with a door to the backyard. As I stopped beside that door I could hear steady knocking noises. I knew then that somebody was trying to make a hole in the wall to get through."

"What did you do then?" prompted Hari.

"I tiptoed back and woke up your great-grandpa and two of the

youngsters. We armed ourselves with strong bamboo poles and went back to the passage. We weren't a minute too soon. Just as we reached there, a small portion of the wall caved in and we could see a shadow figure trying to get in."

"Oh! What happened then?" breathed Priya.





"We all sprang on him. But we made such a racket and our poles got so much in each others' way that the rogue didn't get the beating he deserved! He must have been very quick on his feet as well. For almost at once we heard footsteps thudding away. By the time we burst through the door there was not a soul in sight. Otherwise I'd have had his blood, I can tell you," finished great-grandmother grimly.

"Anyway, you did stop him from thieving," pointed out Hari.

The lady looked a little discontented. "Not entirely," she grumbled, "you see we had our toilets and bathrooms out in the backyard. And that good-for-nothing made off with all our mugs."

Priya laughed and said, "Poor fellow, that's all he could get?"

Yes, sighed great-grandma, "but what a tiresome time we had next morning. No way to have a bath or relieve oneself. How awful it was! That day we found out something. We discovered how important mugs are for a happy and harmonious life!"

TIPPU AND HIS GANG

"I think it would have been much more exciting," said Hari, if the thief had really taken something of value and you had caught him red-handed."

"Oh, no" said his great-grandma crossly.

"Well, it would have been more fun," agreed Priya.

"Oh, we have fun," said the old lady, "The kids give us plenty of that!"

"But where are the kids? I haven't seen any," said Hari.

"Next page," said great-grandmother briskly.

They turned the page eagerly and came upon a snapshot of four tousle-headed boys laughing as though they'd just shared an enormous joke. The boys looked as though they might be between the ages of five and thirteen.

"Who're they?", Priya wanted to know.

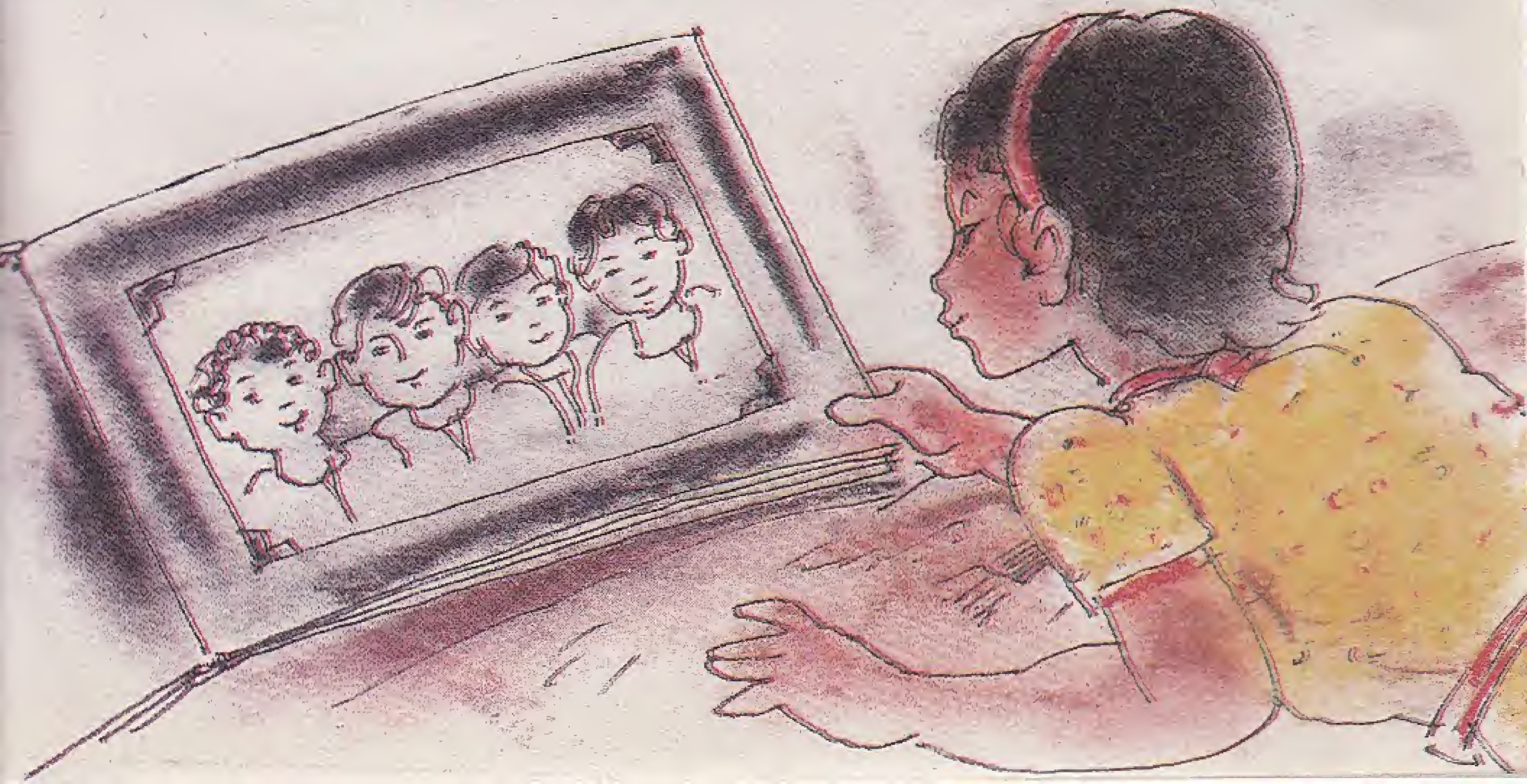
"I think that's my granddad," said Hari, pointing to the oldest of the foursome. "Great-grandma's son, you know."

"And the others?"

"They are his brothers Appu, Kuppu and Thambu."

"Such names!" said Priya, making a face, "And your grandfather—did he have a name like that as well?"

"These are just pet names," said Hari, "My grandpa had an odd one too. He was called Tippu."





"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Like Tippu Sultan?"

"Maybe."

"They look mischievous?" Priya remarked.

All of a sudden Hari and Priya found themselves standing right next to the children whose picture they'd been gazing at. The four were busy playing a game.

"Where are we?" asked Priya, looking about her with interest at the large hall in which they now stood.

"It's my grandfather's house," said Hari, "in our town."

In the centre of the hall, close to where they stood was an open



space open to the sun. It made the room airy and well-lit. There seemed to be other rooms leading off from the four corners of the hall.

To their right was a short passage which led to the front door. Across the hall to their left they could see another passage and beyond that another doorway. Through that open door they could see a bolted door some distance away. "Oh, what a line of doors!" exclaimed Priya.

"Shhh!" said Hari.

"Why should I 'shh'?" objected Priya.

"They'll hear us talking and wonder why we're here," whispered Hari.

"D' you know something," said Priya, not bothering to lower

her voice, "I don't think they can hear us or even see us. Look, they haven't noticed us at all!"

It really felt queer. "As though we're ghosts," muttered Hari.

Hari went over to where grandfather Tippu sat, and stood right behind him. Suddenly Tippu snapped, "Who's breathing down my neck?" and looked over his shoulder. But, of course, he couldn't see Hari though he looked him straight in the eye. Hari quietly stepped back.

"D'you see that game they're playing?" remarked Priya. "It's like Ludo."

It was a large piece of cardboard on which twenty-five squares were drawn. The square at the centre of each side and also the square at the centre of the board were marked with a cross. The boys were using buttons as coins and four cowrie shells as dice. Each shell that fell open-side up counted as one, but if all four shells fell dome-upward it was counted as eight. The coins went right round the board in a spiral till they got home to the centre of the board.

The boys were trying their best to land on each others' counters to send them back to the start just as in Ludo.

"Grandpa's winning," said Hari.

All of a sudden, Kuppu wailed, "You're cheating!" as one of his counters was set upon by Tippu's. "You only got three, not four. I saw you!"

"No, I got four," said Tippu assertively, "didn't I, Thambu?"

"Yes," said Thambu.

"No," shouted Appu, "Tippu's cheating."

A tussle broke out. For a few minutes arms and legs were flying everywhere. Then Thambu let out a cry as Kuppu's punch landed on him squarely.

All at once about ten people popped out from rooms on both sides of the hall, and from the inner passage.

"So many people!" gasped Priya, "Where were they all this time?"

"These children are always fighting," grumbled an elderly lady coming towards the four struggling children. Seeing her advance, Tippu pushed himself free and ran out of the hall and out through the front door. The other three followed him with admirable speed.

"Aren't they quick?", panted Hari, as he and Priya raced after them to see what they'd be up to next.

A TASTY DIP

The four came to a halt, just fifty yards down the street. They stood at the foot of a tree, and were gazing up at a kite dangling from the end of a long branch. The branch was quite high. It wouldn't be



easy to get up that far. No, it wouldn't be easy, although the tree did overhang a house and the wall would lend some support to a climber.

Tippu looked at it through narrowed eyes. Then he said, "It can't be done."

"It can," said Appu.

"Can't," Tippu's tone was firm.

"Can," claimed Appu confidently.

"All right, you do it," said Tippu, in an off-hand, manner.

Not one to be put down, when it came to a challenge, Appu started up the tree. He was adept at climbing, quickly finding footholds in the rough bark of the tree, and steadying himself against the wall of the adjoining house when he needed to. He reached a cleft made by a couple of branches with the main trunk, and stopped for a breather.

"So that's all you can do!" mocked Tippu.

"Down, down, Appu," chanted Thambu, who seemed to enjoy taking Tippu's part.

"He's just resting. Can't you see?" said Kuppu, rallying to Appu's support.

Appu left the safety of the cleft and started upon the riskier part of his attempt. He'd have to climb up another three feet, to reach the branch on which the kite dangled. And then, he could have to go along it for a good eight feet or so, without losing his hold. The children standing below, watched with bated breath.

Appu had to look around a bit for a foothold. The one he could spot, would bring him at an awkward angle to the level of the upper branch, which wasn't so good. Then squirming through to the other side of the cleft, he found another foothold. After an effort involving a bit of scraping and slithering, it took him to the branch. Then, slowly, he began to inch along it.

"He climbs well!" exclaimed Hari in admiration.

Appu had reached within an arm's length of the kite now. With triumph written all over his face, he looked down at Tippu. Then he stretched his arm to pull the kite free. The string of the kite was a little obstinate, all tangled up among the leaves. Appu took one sharp tug at it, and with that same movement, toppled off the branch with an alarmed yell and disappeared from view.

"Appu!" yelled Kuppu.



"Come on," said Tippu, and set off at a gallop. He went through the open door of his neighbour's house, which seemed to have the same kind of hall and passages as his own house had, although this house was a little smaller. Nobody in that house seemed to be bothered by this invasion, maybe they were used to galloping children!

Tippu emerged into the inner courtyard, with all the other children close behind him. On their left was a thatched cowshed. There was a large, ragged hole in the thatch now to show where Appu had fallen. And inside the cowshed was a cattle-trough brimming with a beige-coloured fluid.

As they looked, something moved vigorously within the cattle-trough. Then that thing emerged. It was a wet and happy Appu with a bedraggled kite in his hand!



"I got it!" exulted Appu.

"What's the use? You can't fly that," said Tippu disdainfully.

"Look at you!" said Kuppu. Indeed Appu looked a sight.

Appu wasn't a whit put off. In fact, he appeared to be enjoying himself. "This thing tastes great!" he said, pointing to the liquid in the trough out of which he had risen.

"Don't be silly!" chided Kuppu.

"Really," Appu insisted. "It's got buttermilk, and a lot of tasty left-overs and groundnut cake and til cake. It's really yum! You ought to taste it."

Kuppu and Thambu looked at him half-tempted, half-suspicious. "As though cattle feed could be tasty!" exclaimed Thambu, looking towards Tippu to see how he would react.

"It is tasty," said Tippu unexpectedly. He sounded like a judge.

"You mean you've tasted it?" Thambu couldn't believe

"Yes."

"And it's really yummy?"

"Yes."

Well, when Tippu declared that the contents of the cattle-trough were tasty, Kuppu and Thambu couldn't keep away from such wonderful stuff. They cupped their hands and dipped them in the trough and took a sip each. It did taste good. They followed it up with many generous handfulls. Appu too had another go.

"You were right," Thambu turned towards Tippu, "Come along, have some too."

"No."

"Why not? You agreed that it tastes good," Appu reminded him.

"Yes, come on," Kuppu joined in.

"No."

The other three stopped capering about the trough and turned to face him.

"Why not?" asked Appu, deeply suspicious now.

"It's great stuff," explained Tippu airily, "but it gives you terrific loose motions the day after. You won't be able to keep your pants on tomorrow." And he set off towards home at a run, before the other three could charge at him.

Hari and Priya would undoubtedly have followed them, but unfortunately found that they were no longer in the picture. They were back in Hari's room facing the album once more.

THE FOUR RATS

They turned another leaf of the album.

A girl of sixteen-or-so beamed at them—her merry face drew smiles immediately from the two children.

“Hey, you must be granny!” exclaimed Hari, “But a young granny.” He was immensely happy to see his grandmother, for she’d died when he was about six and he remembered what a loving soul she’d been.

“Well, if it isn’t Hari! You young rascal!” she exclaimed affectionately.

“You look cute in this photo, granny,” enthused Hari, “And you know something, we saw grandpa and his brothers doing some crazy things just now.”

“Like what?”

“They were near a cattle-trough—and Grandpa let the others drink from it!”

“Oh that! Yes, they told me about it. In fact, Appu would keep telling me these wild stories, and your grandfather got mad at him,” twinkled grandma.

“And did you get married too, when you were just five?” asked Priya. After all, Hari’s great-grandmother had done that.

“Oh, no!” said grandma, shocked, “The law didn’t allow it. I was married when I turned fifteen.”

“Was it a grand wedding?” Priya wanted to know.

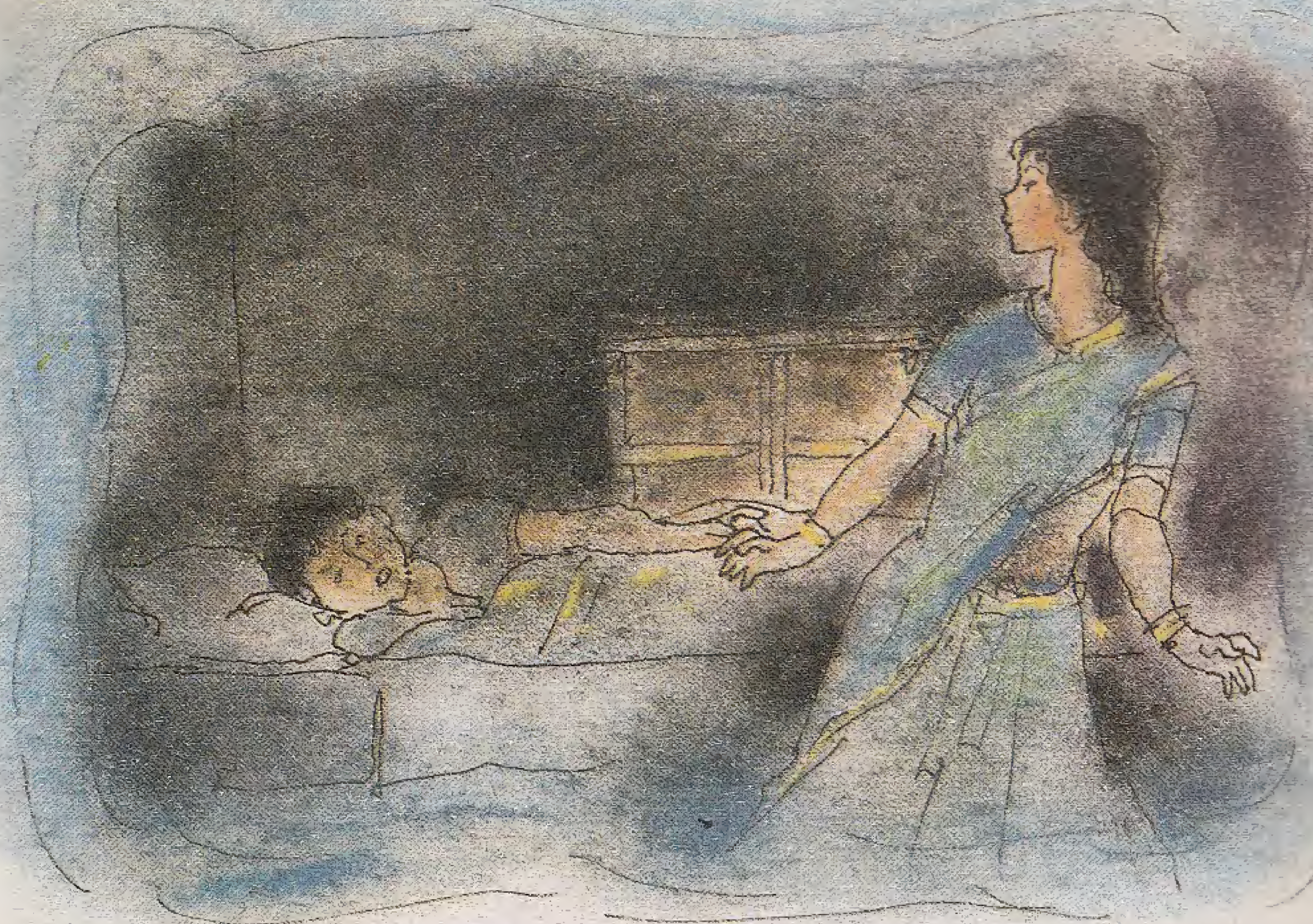
“Well.. I don’t know about grand, but it went on for five days. And you know what happened? On the morning of the wedding—the actual wedding - your grandfather just couldn’t be found!” giggled grandma.

“He ran away?”

“Oh, don’t be silly! It’s just that his brother Kuppu heard about a fire in a nearby hamlet that morning. He told his brothers and they all decided to put out the fire, marriage or no marriage. So they disappeared and you can imagine the fuss there was. People turned the place upside down looking for them. And then about noon these four trooped back looking utterly grimy. How I wished I’d gone with them,” granny finished with a laugh.

“What a jolly gang you must have been!” said Hari.

“I bet you had fun all day long” sighed Priya.



"Nothing of the sort!" said grandma. "I was busy in the house. Your grandpa went off to work and the others were by then studying seriously."

"How could they all turn so serious?" moaned Hari.

"Of course," said grandma, winking, "we found time for an odd prank or two."

"Tell us, granny," begged Hari.

"Well, I remember one memorable night about the time this snap was shot," began grandma. "It was the middle of the night, and I felt terribly hungry. I felt sure I couldn't stand it till the morning. So I thought I'd slip down to the kitchen and drink some buttermilk. Up I got, and just as I crept out of the room, something touched my arm. God, how I jumped!"

"What was it?" asked Priya, wide-eyed.

"It was only Thambu. He wanted to know, what I was doing, creeping about at that time of the night. Then he said he was hungry

as well. And a moment later, we found Appu and Kuppu at our side, They were hungry too."

Priya giggled.

"So then, there were four of us. We tiptoed to the kitchen, closed the door and lit a lamp. I brought out the buttermilk and was about to pour out a glass. Then Appu said he wanted some food not just buttermilk. Wasn't there some rice, he wanted to know."

"And there wasn't any?" suggested Hari.

"Oh, there was plenty," explained grandma. "You see we always



kept some leftover for the morning. We'd mix that with buttermilk and have it for breakfast. So that night it took us just a minute to get at the rice. It was kept as usual in a big vessel, covered with a heavy stone on top of it so that the rats wouldn't get it. I had to be very careful, not to make any noise taking out the rice, and then the buttermilk, and then some pickle. And ah, what a feast we had. Food never tasted so good in all my life!"

"Nobody heard you?"

"Not a soul. Then we quietly washed up, put everything back turned off the lamp, and went back to our beds feeling well-fed and happy."

"And did they find out in the morning?"

"Not at once. I was in the kitchen when I saw your great-grandma turn towards the vessel we'd emptied the night before. I thought I'd die of fright. I silently watched out of the corner of my eye as she removed the heavy stone. Then she lifted off the lid and put her hand in for the rice. A look of horror came over her face and she let out a scream." And grandma began to giggle. "Oh, wasn't it funny!"

"Don't laugh now, grandma, please," begged Hari, "Tell us what happened then."

"With all the noise your great-grandma was making, everyone came running, of course. They all piled up asking what had happened. And then..." Grandma gave way to laughter once again.

"Oh, grandma," said Hari, "You'll never finish the story at this rate."

"All right, I won't laugh, though it was crazy!" continued grandma, "You know what your great-granny told them? She said that a rat had been at the rice and eaten all of it, every bit!"

"You mean, no one thought it was mischief?" asked Priya.

"Well, I was standing there choking and trying not to laugh," went on grandma, and I saw your grandpa beginning to look as though he smelt a rat. That made me want to giggle all the more. Then all of a sudden there was Appu saying that he'd seen the rats who did it! And counted them, too. Four rats, he said. That was too much for me, and I sat down and started to laugh. All the elders turned and looked at me, as though I'd gone mad."

"Poor granny, it got you into trouble?" asked Hari, full of sympathy.

"Not really, for that wasn't all. After Appu said that he'd seen the rats, he turned and walked off coolly. Everyone there began to think about what Appu had said. Then a silly old aunt rolling her eyes in wonder, exclaimed, "They must be such clever rats! They'd taken off the heavy stone and the lid, and even put them back! Would you believe it".

Priya giggled suddenly. "Imagine a bunch of rats carefully putting back the lid!" She chortled. And Hari's grandma looked ready to go off in another gale of laughter.

"Granny, don't, don't, don't laugh!" pleaded Hari.

Granny checked herself and continued, "And then it was Kuppu's turn. He said in a very serious tone, that he'd seen the rats too. And he'd noticed, those rats looked as though they were upto no good. Like crooks, said Kuppu. So he looked at them carefully. He could swear to it— there were three gentlemen rats and a lady rat!"

"Oh-oh" exclaimed Priya, "then they caught on, didn't they?"

"Yes," chuckled granny, " but you see, there were four of us in it, so it wasn't too bad. And in anycase, after the initial shock they all saw the fun of it. So they just grumbled a bit and let us off."

"Uncle Kuppu was crazy," said Hari. "Gentlemen rats and lady rats, what a silly thing to say! Couldn't he keep his mouth shut?"

"Oh, he couldn't do that!" exclaimed granny. "It wouldn't have been natural. Kuppu always had the loudest mouth in the family. That's why he's went on to make such a marvellous lawyer. Ah, the stories he tells, you never could believe half of them!"

"I wish, I could hear them," said Priya wistfully.

"Why don't you just ask him, my dear," suggested grandma. "You'll find him a few pages on a smart young fellow in a three-piece suit."

SAAMBU'S GOLD

They found uncle Kuppu easily enough. Or rather, he found them first. For as soon as they got to his page, his voice rapped out at them, "A pair of brats, I can see that. And up to no good. Where did you come from?"

This attack was so sudden, that they were taken aback. Hari stammered, "We're not brats. And I don't think..."

"Of course, you don't think," interrupted great-uncle Kuppu, "I knew it the moment I saw you."

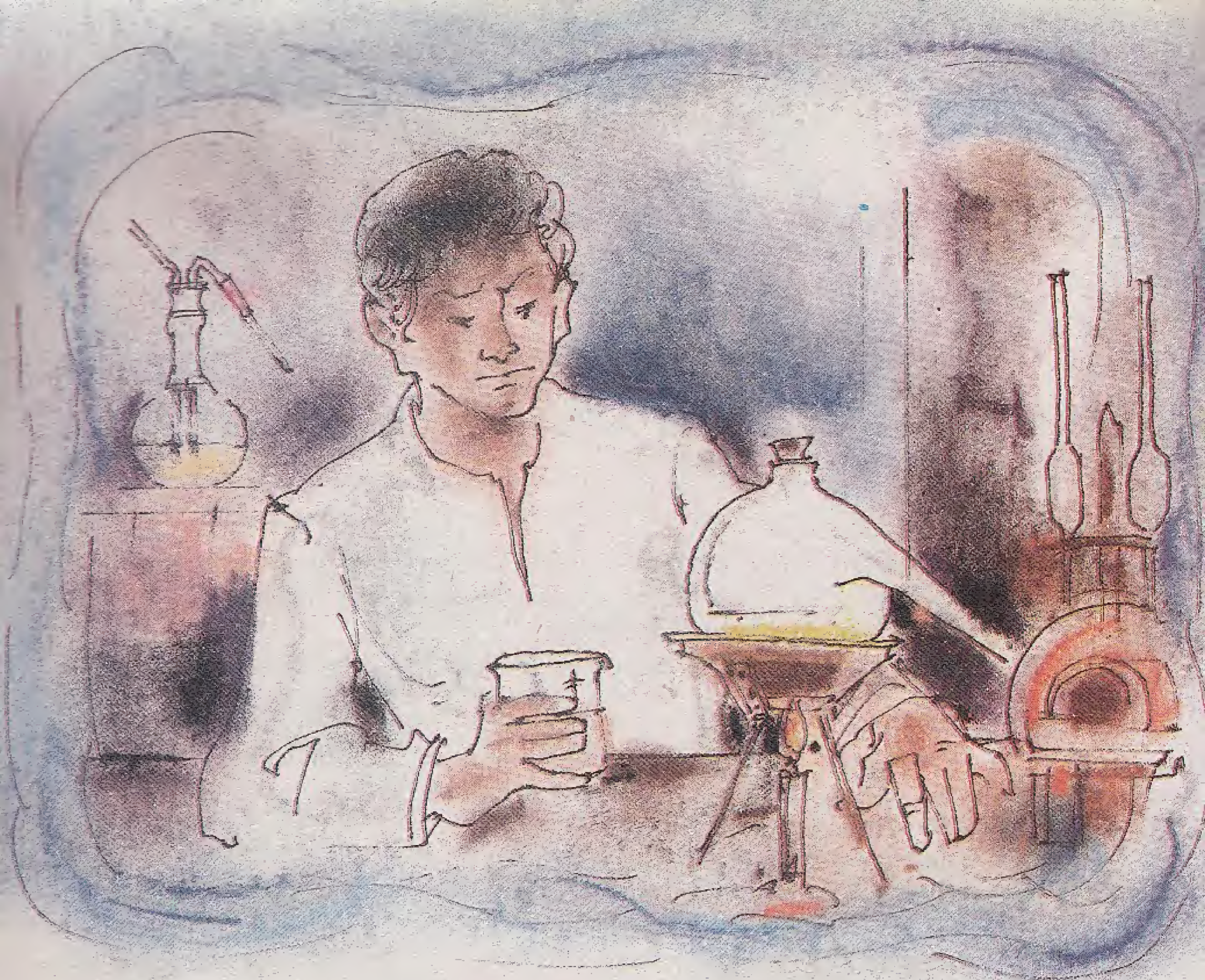
Priya giggled.

Hari looked cross.

"I don't think either," continued Uncle Kuppu, "I'm glad to say. It's the guys who think too much are the ones who never get anywhere. Like my poor friend Saambu."

Priya's eyes lit up. "What happened to Saambu?", she asked.





"Well, Saambu is a great one for thinking," said uncle, "He's somewhat of a scientist, in his own odd way of course. He says that in Vedic times our guys had already found out everything that's worth knowing. So he keeps searching out scraps of old manuscripts and ancient stone inscriptions. He says that they're all full of formulae for making wonderful things..."

"Wow!" exclaimed Hari, "Did that help him to make some great discovery?"

"Always on the point of making one," said uncle Kuppu, but, poor guy—never had much luck. Something always went wrong in the end. Like the time Saambu found a formulae for making gold."

"Oh, boy!" said Hari, all excited, "How do you do that?"

"Well, you start with tiger's urine," rattled off great-uncle Kuppu, "You evaporate it to one-fourth. And then you add an equal amount of mercury, weight for weight, and..."

"Tiger's urine!" Priya wrinkled her nose at the thought, "Chhee!"

"In any case," asked Hari, "Where can you get a regular supply of it?"

"Saambu had it all thought out. And it was quite feasible, really. You see there were a pair of tigers in the Madras zoo, so he made a deal with the keeper. Saambu paid the keeper something every week for collecting what Saambu wanted. So much per bottle, you know."

"And it worked?" asked Hari eagerly.

"The collections came regularly. Saambu had his lab going full swing, processing every batch as it came in. It went on for months. But somehow Saambu, poor chap, never got even a speck of gold!"

"The formula must have been wrong," said Hari knowledgeably.

"Can't say," said great-uncle. "After all, Saambu checked and went through his manuscripts a hundred times. In fact, I have my own explanation for why he never succeeded in this experiment."

"Maybe his equipment wasn't good enough?" queried Hari.

"Not exactly," said great-uncle. "I think the zoo-keeper may have had too much trouble collecting the tiger's sample. After all, tigers are ferocious beasts, not very easy to handle. Maybe the guy cheated a bit, and gave Saambu a different sample altogether. You know what I mean—not tiger's, not exactly!"

"Oh, Uncle!" said Priya, when she'd stopped laughing. "What a crazy story! Don't you know any proper ones?"

"I'm sorry, my dear," said great-uncle. "It's the best I can do. But don't worry, there are plenty of good yarns left in the family. Have you heard the story of our Tar Babies?"

"Tar Babies?" echoed Priya.

"I've never heard that one," said Hari.

"There you are! Just go along to the next page. You'll find a small boy there," said great-uncle. "He's my son Somu, one of the Tar Babies himself. The other was my brother Tippu's son, Kittu."

"My father?" gasped Hari, disbelievingly.

"Oh, so that's who you are," said great-uncle Kuppu, "I've never met you before, but you did look a bit familiar. Well, run along now. I can see you're dying to hear that story!"

THE TAR BABIES

Somu turned out to be a six-year-old boy, sporting a military cap on his head.

"Are you," began Hari, "one of the Tar Babies?"

But Somu appeared not to hear him. In fact, he turned his back on Hari and Priya, and waved to someone in the background. Priya noticed then, that they'd merged into the picture once again. "Why does this always happen to us, when kids are around?" wondered Priya.

Hari merely shrugged off her question. He was too busy looking about him, at their new surroundings. They found themselves in a large yard. There was a house to one side of it, and several sheds and outhouses towards the back. Another youngster had just emerged from one of the sheds. It was to him that Somu had waved.

"Hey Kittu!" Somu yelled and waved again.

Hari watched in fascination as the pint-sized version of his dad strolled up. Kittu seemed to be of the same age as Somu. He was stocky and wore spectacles.

"Where were you?" demanded somu. "What were you doing?"

"Do you know what I found?" said Kittu, in the manner of one imparting exciting news. "The storeroom in the second shed is open!"

Somu's eyes sparkled at that. "What's in it?" he asked.

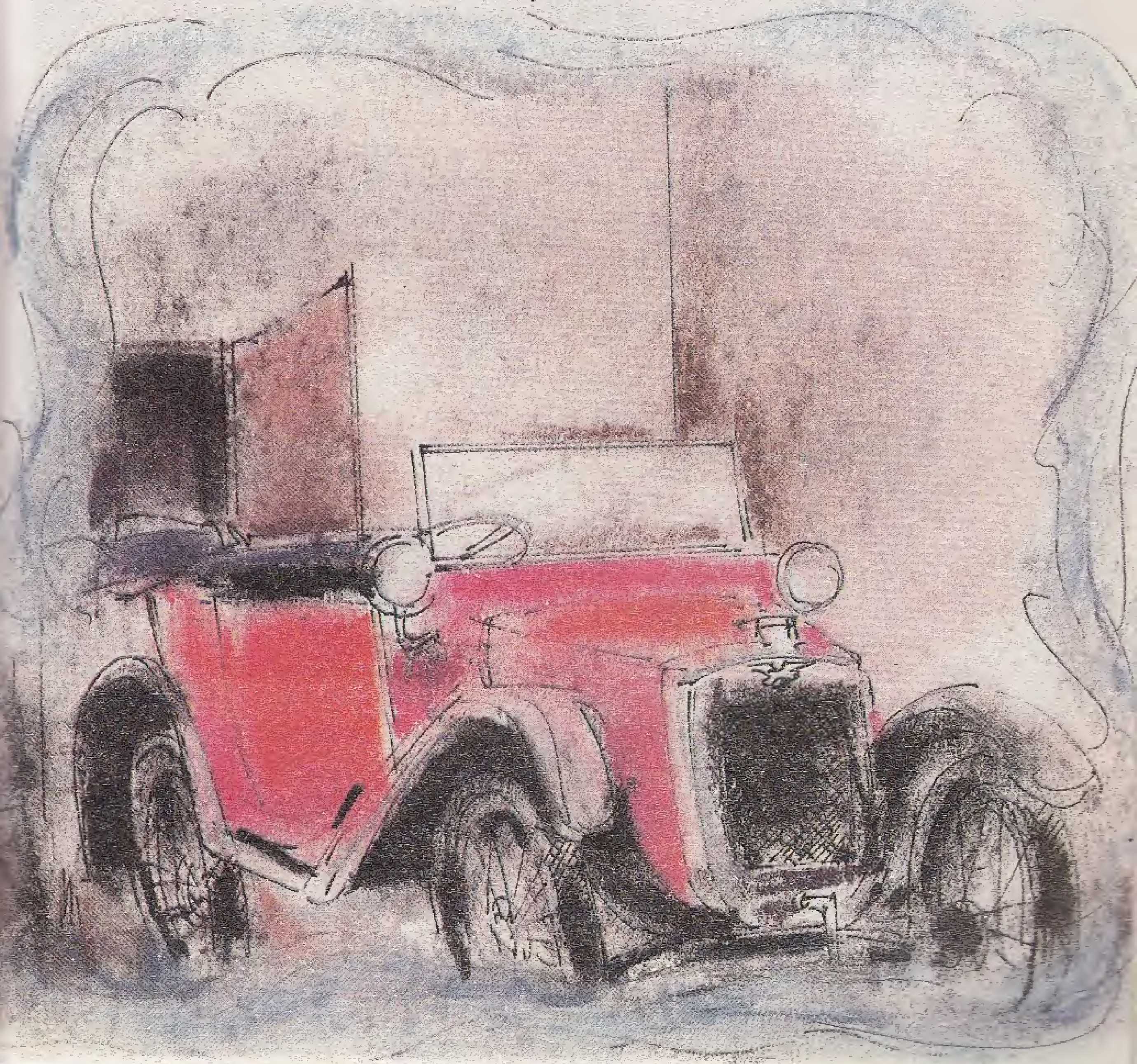
"Lots of things," said Kittu, his eyes equally bright. "Come and see."



Somu followed Kittu to the shed, and behind them, unknown to both, trooped Hari and Priya. The shed was meant to be a garage. It housed an Austin car. A section of the shed towards the back was partitioned off, and its door stood open. That obviously was the storeroom that Kittu had mentioned.

Inside the room were a couple of tall drums, a few big tins, some tools, four or five long bamboo poles, a ladder, and a whole lot of odds and ends. Priya thought that it looked just like the storeroom in Hari's house, though she didn't want to say anything about it.

"Do you know what's in that drum?" asked Kittu. It was obvious that he knew the answer already.



"No, what?" asked Somu, leaning over the edge of the drum.

The drum was half-full of tar. The weather was hot, and the tar was gooey. Somu looked around and picked up a screwdriver from the floor. He stirred the tar and pushed off the scum on its surface. The thick black liquid underneath gleamed up at them. Almost dreamily, Somu lifted the screwdriver out of the drum, and applied its tarred end to the wall. He started to write his name. But the tar was thick, and he had to dip his 'pen' several times into the tar, before he could get it done. Kittu watched him critically and offered suggestions.

"Let me write, too," said Kittu, when Somu had finished. He then took the screwdriver and stirred the tar in the drum vigorously. When he lifted it to the wall, some tar dripped on to the floor, and on to his shirt as well.

"Yuck!" said Priya, but of course Kittu couldn't hear that.

Just as Kittu started writing on the wall, it occurred to him that he would prefer to draw something instead. So, first he drew a motorcar, and then he drew a stick figure of a man. Somu watched admiringly and said, "You really draw well, Kittu. Can you draw a ship?"

Kittu obligingly stirred up some more tar, and set to work again on the wall.

"Aren't they messing up the wall!" exclaimed Priya.

"It's horrible," agreed Hari. It embarrassed him, to find that his father, as a child, had been ready for such misdoings.

"That ship is grand, but a little crooked," said Somu.

"I'll paint some waves. Then it'll look alright," said Kittu.

Hari and Priya stood near the far side of the second drum, watching all this action. Priya thought that she heard a sound outside the shed, but couldn't be sure. Somu and Kittu were making too much noise anyway.

"You can paint a beach on that side," cried Somu excitedly.

"With palm trees," added Kittu.

Just then, a figure appeared at the door of the storeroom. It was a tall, stern man. Hari and Priya shrank back behind the drum, as they saw him. In any case, all his attention was on Somu and Kittu, and on the wall that they'd been painting. Glancing at the wall, he stood transfixed. Clearly he was not pleased with all that artwork!

"Who did that?" he roared.

But Somu and Kittu had frozen the moment they saw him at the door. Between the two of them, they couldn't get out a single word of explanation. The screwdriver fell from Kittu's hand, with a clatter. Somu gulped a couple of times, and tried shaking his head.



"Who's that man?" whispered Priya, glad that they were out of sight, behind the big drum.

"I think it's grandfather Tippu," whispered back Hari.

They could hear Hari's grandfather saying in furious tones, "Oh, so you like to paint, is it? Well, so do I!"

And as Hari and Priya peered round their drum, they saw grandfather Tippu picking the screwdriver from the ground and plunge it into the tar. Then, as they watched amazed, he brought it out with a flourish, and then quick as a flash, he painted a streak on each of somu's cheeks. Somu bawled loudly. Kittu made an attempt to flee, but he was quickly stopped. Then he was 'branded' too, on both cheeks. Then grandfather Tippu threw the screwdriver down. He gripped the two 'Tar Babies' by the shoulder, and marched them out of the shed. Hari and Priya followed at a safe distance.

Grandfather left Kittu and Somu in the yard, and walked off,



apparently quite happy with the punishment he'd meted out.

Somu's loud wails had drawn quite a lot of attention by now. People poured out of the main house, and descended on Somu and Kittu, asking what it was all about. But there was no sense to be got out of Somu at any rate—his wails only grew louder. Kittu, on the other hand, stood silent and red-faced. A flood of tears streamed down his face, and worked the tar firmly into his cheeks, and into his clothes. But he was too proud to be caught crying, so he tried to look nonchalant, as though nothing much had happened!

Hari and Priya could see that Hari's grandmother was also one of the group. "What happened, Kittu?" asked granny, in a tone of great concern.

Kittu composed his face. Then with a watery grin, he explained. "Father paints awfully well."

Just then a young man stepped in at the front gate. He had a white coat and a stethoscope dangling over his left arm. Perhaps he was a doctor or studying to be one. He stopped, as his eyes took in the group, then he walked briskly towards it.

"I bet that's Uncle Thambu," said Hari. "I know he became a doctor."

Uncle Thambu looked at Somu and Kittu, with amused interest. "Tarred, if not feathered," he remarked.

Kittu twinkled up at him through his tears. Uncle Thambu was a great favourite of his.

"Who did it?", Uncle Thambu asked him.

"Father."

"Why?"

"Because we painted the storeroom in the shed."

"With tar?"

"Yes."

Uncle Thambu gave a small hoot of laughter, and then said cheerfully, "Ah, yes, the punishment fits the crime!"

"Yes, doesn't it?" agreed Kittu.

"Baw!" went Somu, "Baw!"

Somewhere in the background, Hari and Priya became aware of a car, noisily drawing up and honking. Somehow the sound seemed unnaturally loud, too loud too close...

BACK IN THE PRESENT

"Oooh!" said Priya, as she found herself tumbling out of the book again.

Hari tumbled out beside her. "Why did we jump out so suddenly?" he demanded, "We were having such a wonderful time!"

They could hear the sounds of a car noisily turning into the gate. "My father's back!" announced Hari. "That must have been the sound I heard when we were getting back."

They looked out of the window just in time to see Hari's father shutting the gate and striding towards the house. It was already dusk.

"How did it get so late!" exclaimed Priya, quite startled, "My mother's going to be mad at me. I've got to go."

The two of them left the room in a hurry, and Priya trotted off home.

Hari looked around for his father, and found his father emerging from the bathroom after a wash.

"You do look better without the tar," commented Hari, absent-mindedly.

"Tar?", said his father, quite astonished.

"Oh, nothing," muttered Hari, coming out of his reverie.

"Where's Priya? I thought she'd have tea as well," said Hari's mother, as she came out of the kitchen.

"She ran off because it's late," explained Hari.

"I saw you both bent over a book an hour ago," said Hari's mother, "Was it a comic?"

Hari, however, didn't hear her question, because he was thinking again of some of the people he'd met in the album. He glanced across at his father, and wondered how such a ramshackle child as the Kittu he'd seen had grown into the dignified figure of his dad. And out popped the question before he could stop himself, "Daddy, when you were a kid, did your father paint your cheeks with tar?"

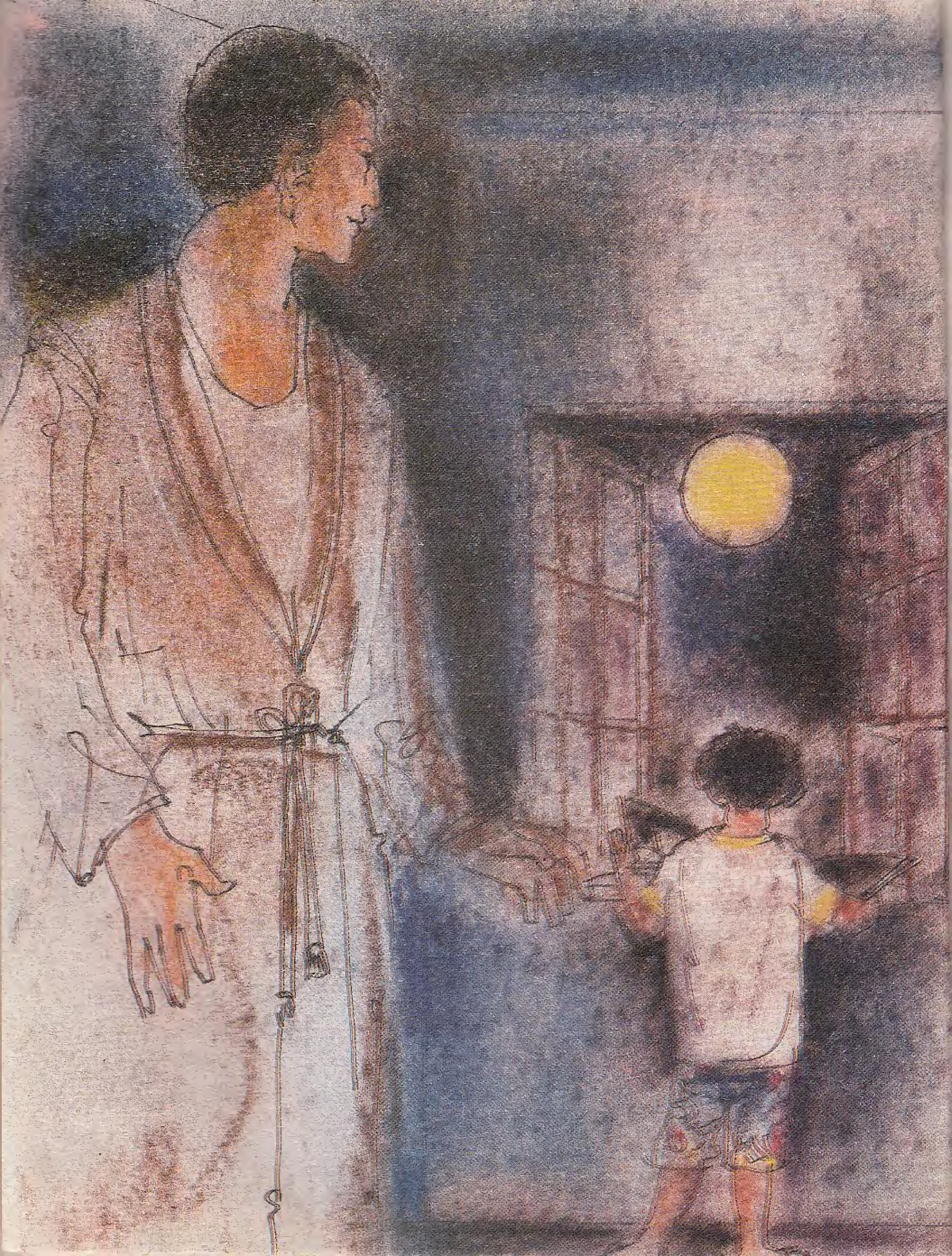
"Who told you about that?!" said his father, taken aback.

"I-um," fumbled Hari, "I think granny told me about it sometime."

"And you remembered it suddenly after all these years?", his father sounded disbelieving.

"Yes, why not?", demanded Hari.





"Humbug! I bet someone told you the story today," said his father, glancing suspiciously at Hari's mother.

"Not me," she said firmly, "I've been too busy all day."

"I was looking at the old album," said Hari, "and that reminded me."

"Oh, the old album!" exclaimed his father, "I didn't know we still had that."

Hari had meant to look at the album again after dinner, but by that time he was just too sleepy. He was hardly able to flop onto his bed before he fell asleep. It must have been all the entrancing experiences of the day that had tired him so. And even as he drifted off some of the magic stayed with him.

Just before midnight, Hari's father was wakened from his sleep by the sound of a loud bump and the scraping of a chair. It seemed to come from Hari's room, so he went to find out what was up. To his surprise, he found Hari standing by the window in a bright patch of moonlight with the album open in his hands.

"Hari?" said his father.

But Hari wasn't awake. He'd been dreaming of the album, and so strong was the dream that it set him walking in his sleep. He'd banged into his table when he picked up the album, but that hadn't woken him up. And as he moved towards the window he'd sent his chair scraping against the wall. But he hadn't been aware of that either. And now he stood looking at the album with unseeing eyes.

Hari's father went up closer, and saw that Hari had his eyes wide open, staring at the open page.

Hari's father looked down too and saw that it was a photograph of his own grandmother that his son was gazing at. Hari's father had fond memories of his grandmother—she'd been a bit stern, but nevertheless, very loving. Now as he looked down at her, suddenly, to his astonishment, he found her smiling up at him.

"Boom, boom..." went the clock twelve times, and between the seventh stroke and the tenth stroke Hari's father thought he heard the old lady say, "Kittu! Is that you, you little scoundrel!"

He shook his head in disbelief. Then he peered down again at the snapshot. But then it looked just as still as photographs have always looked. And the old lady looked ahead, prim and proper.

"The mind plays the oddest tricks," thought Hari's father as he

helped his son back to bed and tucked him up. He took away the album and tossed it behind a row of books on a shelf as he returned to his own bed.

Priya and Hari tried the next day to get at the old album again, but somehow they just couldn't lay their hands on it. "It doesn't matter," said Hari, "I'll find it sooner or later. And then we only have to wait for great-grandma's birthday to come around again."

"It doesn't matter at all," agreed Priya cheerfully, "Still, all the people in the album were fun." She had begun to get the feeling that this holiday was going to be quite enjoyable. Maybe it had something to do with the cheerful spirits they'd met the day before.

Or maybe because her new friend Hari had a bit of that lively spirit in him too. Between the two of them, she felt sure, they'd find plenty to keep them in good cheer right through that summer.

A FEW FACTS

Chapter 1

Bermudas—knee-length shorts

Chapter 2

The photographer kept popping behind the black sheet—In those days photographic techniques were not so highly developed. It was much more difficult for a photographer to get a good print with the equipment he had. He had to be very careful to see that the amount of light that fell on the photographic film was just right, so a large black cloth was usually draped about the camera. The photographer went under this when he took the photograph, and the sight of him bobbing in and out was often comical.

I was a bride when I was just five—Things have changed since then. In 1929, a law called the Sarda Bill was passed which made it necessary for a girl to be 14 years old before she could marry. Now the law has been further changed so that a girl must be at least 18 years old when she marries. Yet, among the more backward communities girls are still married off sometimes at a very early age.

I travelled all over the state from Anantapur to Kanyakumari—This was the old Madras state which included what is now known as Tamil Nadu and also parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The distance between Anantapur and Kanyakumari would be about 750km, as the crow flies.

Mugs are important for a happy and harmonious life!— This would seem exaggerated to those who have the luxury of an uninterrupted supply of running water. However, even at the end of the twentieth century, only a small percentage of people in our country enjoy that luxury. Therefore, our dire need for buckets and mugs and anything else that bears water!

Chapter 3

Pet name— This term (used quite commonly in India) denotes a name by which a person is affectionately or familiarly known.

It's my grandfather's house— In the past houses in India were built according to traditional ideas of architecture. The style in each part of the country was adapted to the climate. Materials available locally were used. Thus most of the older houses in Tamil Nadu and parts of Andhra Pradesh would resemble Hari's grandfather's house.

Chapter 4

Groundnut cake and til cake— After extraction of oil from groundnuts and til (sesame), the remaining pulp made into compact cakes is used as cattle feed.

Chapter 6

Saambu found a formula for making gold— In the western world, the science of chemistry grew out of the older science of alchemy. The alchemists tried to convert less precious substances into gold. Saambu must have considered himself an alchemist!

Chapter 7

Tar Babies— Readers might like to know that there was a character called the Tar Baby in the first of many Uncle Remus stories, written by American writer Joel Chandler Harris towards the end of the nineteenth century. These stories, about the doings of Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox and others, are extremely enjoyable. The characters in these stories use the kind of language which was spoken by American Negro slaves who worked on plantations.

Tarred, it not featherd— 'to tar and feather' is to smear a person with tar and cover with feathers as a punishment. So as uncle Thambu takes in the appearance of the two children he guesses in some amusement that they have indeed been smeared with tar as punishment, though mercifully not feathered.



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